



WAIST NOT

*The
Migration
of
the
Waist
1800-1960*

THE
METROPOLITAN
MUSEUM OF
ART

Cover. **Evening dress** (Charles Frederick Worth, Paris),
ca. 1893–95. Garnet silk velvet.

Tight corsetting more or less at the natural waist was
combined with a revival of the 1830s gigot sleeves to
make the waist seem smaller than ever.



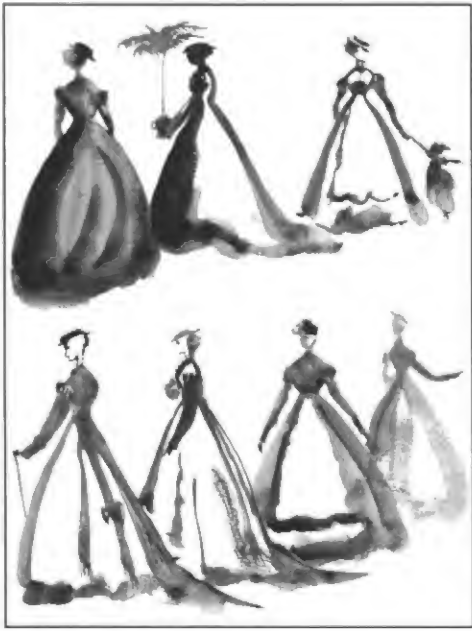
1818



1832



1840



1868



1872



1876

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*The Migration
of the Waist
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RICHARD MARTIN

AND

HAROLD KODA

ARTWORK

BY

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THE
METROPOLITAN
MUSEUM OF ART
NEW YORK

Acknowledgment

It has been a great privilege to work with Ruben Toledo. His portfolio of illustrations has surpassed our expectations. Working directly with garments in the exhibition, he has rendered them with historical truth and has also given them a vivacious presence.

R M & H K

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The Migration of the Waist: 1800–1960

Fashion is anthropomorphic. Dress, surrounding the body, is determined by the shape it envelops. But the body is also defined by fashion in a manner that mingles the determinate form of physiology with the variable values and needs of culture. Recently, anthropology of the body has been subject matter for visual artists and theoreticians alike. Their work has led us to realize both the body's malleability to social shaping and culture's dependence on the body as indicative of an individual's primary cultural condition. Late twentieth-century culture has inflicted body denial upon some individuals, who resort to anorexia and bulimia to consummate control even when that deprivation is inimical to health.

Anthropomorphism implies measure, absolute standards of the body. Such measure is made possible by the body's articulation in many solid forms. The waist is, however, an exceptional area. A malleable zone of organs and muscles located between the bottom two "floating ribs" of the rib cage and the iliac crest of the hips, the waist is the only section of the vertebral column without the protection of bones. Elsewhere, bones protect and design externally. The nature of the waist is defined by its girth and musculature; we take responsibility for that portion of the body's shape. We may blame rich desserts; we may struggle with constricting clothing; we may seek to exercise to a narrow waist; we may yield to gut and love handles. But finally, we must take responsibility.

Fashion's waist is variable. Seldom does fashion confirm the natural waist. The fashion waist not only shifts from the peak of the ilium to the lowest section of the rib cage; it migrates even farther. The fashion waist has been known to meander nearly to the bust and has dropped, especially in the center front, to below the hips, and even to the pelvis. Canted waists can move from under the shoulderblades or the small

of the back to deep descent in the front. As the waist is shaped, especially with corsets, other proportions of the body are affected.

Most frequently, modern Western culture has prized the small waist as a standard of attractiveness. Youth is perhaps the template for such beauty. Age, sedentary life, and good living challenge the small waist. For most adults aged twenty-five to fifty-five, bulges occur first and foremost at the waist. Of course, other societies and times have prized corpulence and differing physiques in expression of their cultural criteria. Further, the placement of the waist and its soft parameters offer it as a natural handle for the body, as crucial to an Antaeus struggle as to any lover's desire. Edmund Waller's seventeenth-century paean "On a Girdle" (1664) animates and even envies the apparel:

That which her slender waist confin'd
Shall now my joyful temples;
No monarch but would give his crown
His arms might do what this has done.

The zaftig, voluptuous beauty of an ample body is an option, but the modern ideal more frequently is directed—sometimes tyrannically so—to the slender waist as fine fulcrum to legs and torso. Scarlett O'Hara's legendary sixteen-inch waist is the recurrent ideal of the virginal young woman.

The body is the matrix of our measure, but the body itself is segmented and gauged. The waist is critical to body and fashion definition because it is both prime cause and personally subjective. We are, in a literal sense, born of omphalos connection, and we are ever aware of this birth zone. The symmetry of the body depends on the belly button, which designates the importance of the waist. But no example of nature and nurture is more compact than that of the birth and girth of the human waist. Born of the zone, we

find it to be our individual expression, not in the manner of soothsaying readings of entrails but in the inevitability of our personal and cultural definition of the waist.

In the West, the natural waist rarely emerges in high fashion. Rather, fashion pretends as artfully as we may desire and as others may desire of us. Rousseau said, "Nature never deceives us; it is always we who deceive ourselves." Fashion allows us the deceptions we desire. Again and again, the objects and proportions of fashion allow individuals to work toward the aesthetic ideal of the time. Human beings are of differing, specific sizes and shapes, yet each era sets its body paragon and its fashion paradigm. Many expressions of the physiological and fashion ideal are found in illustrations that identify the goal and condense the collective body into a single ideal form. Even fashion caricatures are significant data for reconstructing the ideal appearances desired—and unattractive ones to be avoided—in the past. The garments of individuals are often modified versions of the prevailing standard, adjusting the individual's body characteristics to the attainable ideal. Moreover, even the most extreme forms of wasp waists or waists that deviate to higher or lower positions are constituents of ideal proportions, harmonies of relationships of form inferred from body and dress. For example, immense sleeves, swelling at the elbow, bring volume into propinquity with the torso and promote the illusion of a diminished waist.

The 1870s high waist might have suggested a particular body type, but fashion permitted its emulation by other types of women (and by men, though men's physiology and fashion are less the subject of this exhibition). Fashion can suppress some physical traits and emphasize others. In fact, the history of fashion demonstrates a continual, if varied, desire to project an

ideal of beauty attainable through fashion's modifications and artifice's emendations. In the measure to which fashion advocates and projects any ideal, idealism of the waist is central, but fashion's image cannot reasonably be taken as an incentive to surgery, starving, or self-destruction. Rather, fashion's manipulations of the waist have proffered many illusions and modifications to create personal silhouettes in semblance of the culturally desired self-projected body. If anything, contemporary fashion has assimilated fashion history's tour de force techniques of managing illusions of the waist and of simulating predominant proportions. Thus, fashion opportunities today speak to success in achieving ideals without sacrifice to body and health.

In her analysis of Alfred North Whitehead's phrase "the witness of the body," employed as epigram to Delmore Schwartz's poem "The Heavy Bear," philosopher Susan Bordo discerns the body's intimacy with our thinking: "The body as not 'me' but 'with' me is at the same time the body that is *inescapably* 'with me.'" We can conform to an aesthetic ideal to such an intimate intensity that we find it inevitable as a cultural predicate, as likewise we are always with the body that bears our reflection. In this proposition, the waist is an inherent witness. The waist is also a fundamental witness. The fashion waist has generated a suite of alterable ideals in dress and appearance. In rarely conforming to anatomy's destiny, but instead in shaping the body's image and perception, fashion has fulfilled its historically important role to render in silhouette the ideal of our unexpressed witness and the lines of our image-making witness.

Richard Martin, Curator, and Harold Koda, Associate Curator, The Costume Institute, The Metropolitan Museum of Art



I a. **Spencer** (English), ca. 1815. Yellow-green silk taffeta with matching braid and buttons. b. **Dress** (American), ca. 1814. Sheer white linen with self-fabric appliqué. c. **Collar** (American), first quarter 19th century. White mull.

The Empire fashion waist was just under the bust, truncating the torso. Quilted corsets with side boning and a long center-front busk reinforced the columnar silhouette. As the shoulders were held back, the bust seemed even higher.



2 a. **Dress** (American), ca. 1832.
Yellow-green silk taffeta. b. **Leghorn
bonnet** (American), ca. 1825–35.
Black straw with black ribbon and
feather trim. c. **Belt** (French), ca. 1830.
Cotton and metallic thread with gilt
metal buckle.

The 1830s style emphasized the bust
but differentiated the rib cage. The
puffy gigot sleeves and ballooning
skirt accentuated the small, high waist.



3 Dress (American), ca. 1840s. Green silk taffeta.

Like the 1830s corset, the 1840s style expanded with gussets at the hipline supporting a full-skirted silhouette. The torso, however, was visually attenuated by the center-front vee extending below the waist into the abdomen.



4 a. **Afternoon dress** (Maison Clément, Paris), ca. 1866. Chartreuse silk and apple-green silk taffeta with silk soutache braid. b. **Bonnet** (American), ca. 1860. Coarse gray straw with gray taffeta ribbon trim.

After three decades of descent, in the 1860s the fashion waist ascended to the lower ribs, hugging the smallest circumference of the torso. The sleeve, generally tapered at the wrist and armhole, swelled at the elbow in visual contrast to the small waist.



5 a. **Visiting dress** (Pingat, Paris), ca. 1872. Maroon and beige silk faille with velvet trim and fringe. b. **Bonnet** (American), ca. 1870s. Beige felt with brown velvet ribbon and feather trim.

The raised waistline of the 1870s surmounted a fullness of skirt and a magnitude of bustle. The short, cropped appearance of the torso was exacerbated by sloped shoulders, further minimizing the distance between waistline and shoulder line.

6 **Dress** (American), ca. 1876.
Black silk faille.

An hourglass silhouette in a cuirass structure was created with a high waist, just an inch or two under the bust. It was an upholstered, exaggerated silhouette, achieved with a corset with a spoon busk to cup and shape the abdomen.





7 a. **Walking dress** (American), ca. 1883. Dark green silk faille and coordinated figured velvet.
b. **Bonnet** (Mme. Heitz-Boyer, Paris), ca. 1885–90. Dark green velvet with satin ribbons and black lace appliqué.

Dropping from the previous decade, the waistline cleaved to the zone of the waist, now severely pinched. From the front, one saw an extremely narrow waist. From the side, there was the inevitable thickening caused by volume displaced.

8 Day dress (English), ca. 1902. Red, white, and beige pin-checked silk taffeta with embroidered cotton net dickey and black satin sash.

A patently artificial S-curve obtained at the turn of the century almost as if the torso were out of alignment with the legs. The monobosom functioned as a blouson with soft drape obscuring the natural waist. The waistline was angled from its apex at the small of the back to its nadir in front, demonstrably decreasing the center-back length and increasing the center-front length.



9 Evening dress (Callot Soeurs, Paris),
ca. 1910–14. Beige cotton net embroi-
dered with gold, silver, pink, and cop-
per sequins.

The effect of the monobosom was
faintly sustained, but the waistline was
raised in a Directoire revival.





10 Evening dress (Paul Poiret, Paris),
ca. 1920–23. Black and gold silk voile
and black net.

The dropped waist of the 1920s voided the natural waist, except for a seam at the hipline. In the era of Art Deco planarity, the body was conceived of as essentially two-dimensional.

11 a. **Sack dress** (Cristobal Balenciaga, Paris), ca. 1958. Black raw silk.

b. **Cocktail hat** (Cristobal Balenciaga, Paris), 1958. Black velvet with jet beads.

Inspired by the dropped waist silhouette of the 1920s, Balenciaga's chemise quickly became the sack, with midsection fluidity and fullness in contrast to its hobbled hemline.



12 **Trapeze dress** (Yves Saint Laurent for Christian Dior, Paris), spring-summer, 1958. Coral linen.

The 1958 trapeze anticipated the A-line dresses of the 1960s but retained the understructure of the 1950s. Its apparent swing from the shoulders was, in fact, checked by its traditional understructure.

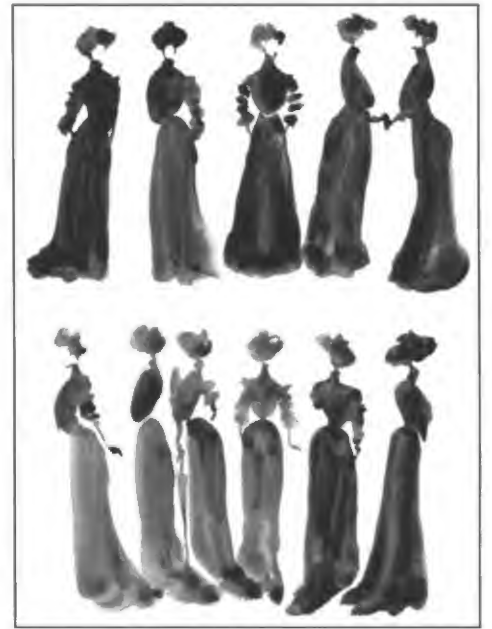




1885



1895



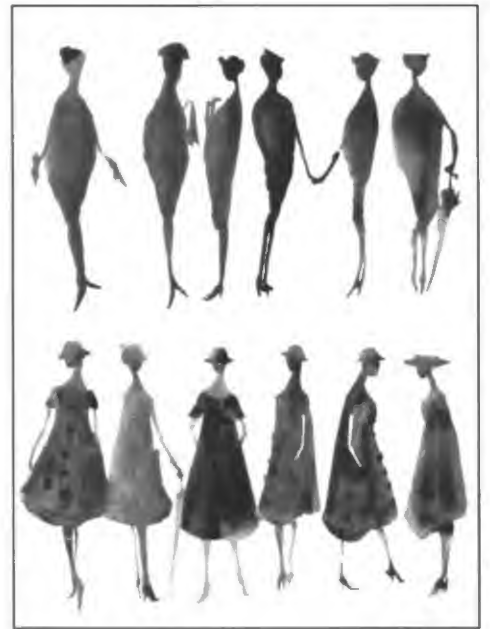
1902



1912



1922



1958

Ruben Toledo's drawings are all pen and ink and wash, except for the cover, which is watercolor. They were drawn directly from dressed mannequins in The Costume Institute. The following are the credit lines for those garments, all of which are in the collection of The Costume Institute, The Metropolitan Museum of Art:

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- 11 a. Gift of Mrs. Herbert Levine, 1973 1973.196.1
- b. Gift of Baron Philippe de Rothschild, 1983 1983.619.14

12 Gift of Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, 1977 1977.108.1

Back cover. **Dress** (American), ca. 1876. Black silk faille. Gift of the Misses Faith and Delia Leavens, 1941 CI 41.58.1 ab

